

Strangers in Our House: Indigenes, Land Rights, and Sierra Leone Mining Conflicts

Fenda A. Akiwumi,

Sierra Leone's incorporation into the global economy through mineral exploitation in the early 1930s has had negative consequences for societal relationships within the country's mining regions. Mass in-migration of individuals of varied race, nationality and ethnicity in pursuit of economic opportunities is a characteristic of mining locales. The presence of such "strangers", those without customary rights to land for subsistence livelihoods such as farming, fishing and hunting generates conflict with indigenes. The central conflict issue is over the "right to place" intensified by new social structures and value systems introduced by mining. The mining company, itself represents a hegemonic stranger establishment usurping rights to the land central to traditional identity and livelihoods. Using case studies from the diamond, gold and rutile mining industries, this paper analyzes the persistent role of strangers in impacting the political, socio-cultural and natural environment in mining regions. More specifically, it addresses the stranger dynamic with regard to relationships with national and traditional government leading to policies and laws that undermine customary land rights and livelihoods, disrespect for indigene values and mores, and the stranger as purveyor of illegal extraction activities and facilitator of environmental deterioration.